

# Hunters Helping Scientists: Alaska will serve as the early warning for H5N1 bird flu

## What is bird flu and why are scientists looking for it in Alaska?

Many types of avian influenza are found naturally in wild waterbirds, but in recent years, a particularly virulent strain of bird flu, known as highly pathogenic Asian H5N1, began to spread from Southeast Asia where it was first detected.

As of August 2006, Asian H5N1 had been found in birds in at least 50 countries. It has not yet been found anywhere in North America, including in Alaska.

But because Alaska is a summer breeding grounds for birds from both Asia and the Americas, our state has been pinpointed by scientists as one of the most likely points of entry for the disease into North America.



## How serious of a threat is bird flu?

Because Asian H5N1 is deadly to poultry, the virus in its current form poses grave danger to poultry industries worldwide. It is far less of a threat to humans, however.

Currently only about 230 people *worldwide* have caught this flu, and most had been in close and prolonged contact with infected poultry. About half of those infected with the virus died.

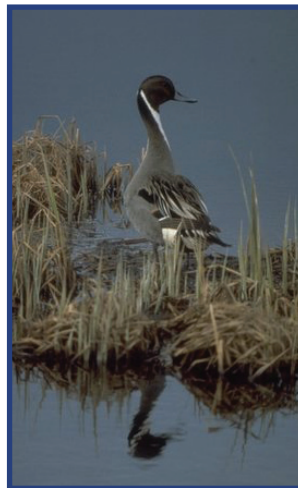
What worries health officials is the capacity for flu viruses to evolve into a different form that could pass easily between humans. A large scale outbreak would be called a human pandemic. There has not been a major flu pandemic since 1968, but government officials are preparing for that possibility, just in case.

## How are scientists trying to find out if bird flu is in Alaska?

A major sampling effort is underway in Alaska this summer. Federal and state agencies are working collaboratively to sample an estimated 15,000 birds among 28 target species that migrate from Asia to Alaska.

## How can hunters help?

Earlier this spring, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service collected 4,000 bird samples from subsistence hunters. This fall, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game aims to collect at least 600 samples from waterfowl shot by sport hunters.



## Where are the hunter-shot samples being collected?

Alaska Department of Fish and Game technicians will be collecting samples from waterfowl during September at the following hunting areas: Susitna Flats, Palmer Hay Flats, Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge and the Delta Junction area.

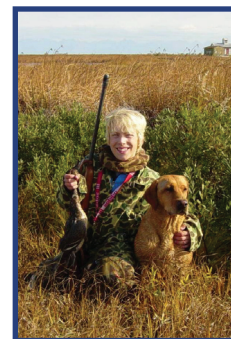
## What is involved in the testing?

The sampling is quick, easy and harmless to game meat. All the scientists need is a small fecal sample taken by swab from the bird's cloaca. Sampling is done on the spot and takes only a minute.

## How soon will hunters learn if a bird tests positive for H5N1?

Samples will be sent to a lab at the U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin. If a sample tests positive, a second laboratory will be used to confirm the finding. Results are returned in about two weeks.

If a hunter-shot sample is found with Asian H5N1, the news will be released immediately through the media. Samples will be tracked by location, not by individual hunter, so hunters should not expect to be notified directly if the virus is found.



## What will happen if Asian H5N1 is found in wild birds in Alaska?

More sampling work would be done quickly along migration corridors to try to figure out where the birds might spread the virus next. At present, wildlife managers do not anticipate that waterfowl hunting would be curtailed unless wildlife and health officials determine that the risk to humans has increased.



## How concerned should hunters be about bird flu?

Hunters should not be overly concerned about H5N1 at the present time but should take common sense precautions concerning hunting hygiene. Wild birds do appear to be capable of transmitting this strain of flu virus to other birds but so far have not proved to be major agents in its spread. As of August 2006, officials had documented just one event in which humans had contracted the virus from a wild bird.

## Should hunters be wearing protective gear when handling game meat?

Field technicians conducting the sampling are wearing rubber gloves because they are handling hundreds of birds in a single day, and are taking cloacal samples.

Hunters, by comparison, handle only a handful of birds. Hunters are advised, however, to follow the precautions outlined on the back of this brochure when handling game birds.

### Bird Flu Resources

To report sick or dead birds:  
1-866-5 BRD FLU (1-866-527-3358)

For overall information:  
[www.avianflu.alaska.gov](http://www.avianflu.alaska.gov)

For information on bird hunting, contact:

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game:  
Anchorage (907) 267-2257, Fairbanks (907) 459-7206, Juneau (907) 465-4148, or your local ADF&G Office.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:  
[alaska.fws.gov/media/avian\\_influenza](http://alaska.fws.gov/media/avian_influenza)

For information on human health:  
1-888-9 PAN FLU (1-888-972-6358) or [www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov)

## Safe preparation and cooking of waterfowl

The chance of contracting Asian H5N1 from wild birds is extremely rare. However, even healthy waterfowl can be infected with micro-organisms and parasites that can move between wildlife and people. The following precautions are recommended at all times when processing waterfowl shot in the wild.

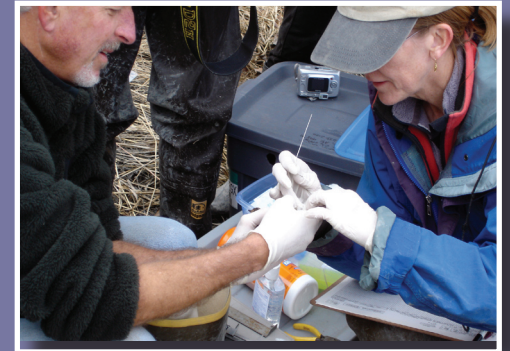
- Use rubber gloves when cleaning game.
- Keep game birds cool, clean and dry.
- Do not drink, eat or smoke while cleaning birds.
- Avoid contacting your mouth or eyes with your hands while handling birds.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or alcohol wipes after dressing birds.
- Clean all tools and surfaces immediately after use. Use hot soapy water, then disinfect with a 10 percent chlorine bleach solution.
- Cook game meat thoroughly (internal meat temperature should reach 165° F, or until juices run clear) to kill disease organisms and parasites.

## Hunt cleanly—eat safely Don't be scared—be prepared

Photo credits: Tom Rothe & Dan Rosenberg, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game administers all programs and activities free from discrimination based on race, color, national origin, age, sex, religion, marital status, pregnancy, parenthood, or disability. For information on alternative formats for this and other department publications, please contact the department ADA Coordinator at (voice) 907-465-6077, (TDD) 907-465-3646, or (FAX) 907-465-6078.

# Sampling Hunter-Shot Waterfowl for Avian Flu



## How Alaska's hunters can help scientists sample for Asian H5N1



**Alaska Department  
of Fish & Game**  
summer-fall 2006